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AUTHOR Dumas, Colleen
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ABSTRACT

A parent of a kindergarten child in Texas began observing her child's classroom when she noticed that the whole language instructional approach described to parents before the beginning of school was apparently not being implemented as stated. The parent was surprised when her child's teacher suggested, after only six weeks of instruction, that the child be put in a transition program the following year because the teacher believed the child was not ready for first grade. As the year progressed, the parent's frustration and anger grew as indications grew that the child's risk-taking abilities and self-esteem were being destroyed. The child is now progressing well through first grade, and the child's teacher is encouraging invented spelling and creative activities in the classroom. Although communication on the parent/teacher level and the parent/principal level has increased awareness of the importance of children's reading capabilities, more parent education needs to be addressed to make the program successful as a whole. (Six examples of the child's writing are attached.) (RS)

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Implementing Whole Language: Collaboration, Communication and Coordination

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Implementing Whole Language: Collaboration, Communication and Coordination

I am a parent of a six year old, who is attending a suburban school in the Katy, Texas area. I had my first experience with teachers implementing whole language instruction last year, when my daughter Nicole entered Kindergarten. I remember attending a meeting at her school, in which teachers were to describe the curriculum to the parents from a whole language perspective. I approached the meeting with excitement and enough knowledge of this philosophy to have an idea of what they would be explaining. My perception of whole language, included the idea that children are exposed to many types of print, and are encouraged to be risk-takers with both spoken and written language. The children are supported in a risk taking environment, which inspires them to be engaged in and excited about learning. The atmosphere is positive, and the children are given specific feedback about their progress. This will encourage more creativity and learning, in which the children feel successful about their work.

According to the Kindergarten teachers, our children would learn reading through whole language. The teachers described some of the techniques they would be using such as:

big books, language experience, use of invented spelling and repeated exposure to print. I was thrilled, that they had these wonderful plans to help my daughter continue to develop her emerging literacy.

This was a basic understanding of whole language as I knew it. I know how important it is to expose the children to print, to read to them everyday, and encourage them to be successful in their endeavors with language learning.

Around the second week of school, Nicole proudly brought home her first example of writing from her Kindergarten class. I was rather disappointed, her entire paper was underwriting, (Example #1). I thought about this in response to the teachers' description of the program and decided I would give the teacher a little more time and see what Nicole would come home with in the next few weeks.

The next example of writing Nicole brought home demonstrated her use of invented spelling, but the teacher had written all over her paper, making corrections where she had misspelled words, (Example #2). I was disturbed by the teacher's response to my child's first attempts at functional writing, basically the teacher destroyed the idea that Nicole's work was her own property. As a result, I decided to ask Nicole questions about what she was doing in her classroom. For example, I asked her if she was being read to

everyday. She told me, that the teacher does not have time to read books everyday. I had a hard time believing that teachers in Kindergarten, would not make reading aloud to children an integral part of the day and felt I needed more information about what was happening in my child's classroom. I felt observing the class once a week would help me to really know what was happening in the classroom. As I observed, I realized that the children were being taught letters and sounds in isolation, rather than within the context of meaningful print experiences. I noticed little, if any, time spent reading to and with children. I also noticed the classroom library only contained approximately ten to twelve books. Is this enough to constitute a print rich environment? What I saw in Nicole's classroom, did not match my understanding of what a whole language classroom looked like in practice. I asked the teacher why she was teaching phonics in isolation, when the children can learn them better within the whole language experiences, and I wanted clarification on what we as parents were told at the beginning of the year. The teacher told me that some students still need to be taught letter by letter, which told me that the teacher's beliefs about how reading occurs, determined her practice, despite her ability to explain whole language philosophy. She did not believe that exposure to

print and real books would encourage children to learn letters and sounds, that are used to make words in the text.

What was happening in the classroom, did not match what we were told. They were using some of the techniques of whole language, but only occasionally. My understandings led me to believe, that to make whole language successful, the teacher must establish routines and remain confident in what she believes about whole language and teach language as a whole consistently, rather than occasionally.

By the end of the first six weeks, as I continued to observe the class, I still was surprised by what I was seeing. Little did I know, that as I attended my first conference of the year, my fears would be confirmed. I was interested in talking with the teacher about her whole language classroom and how my daughter was responding to it, however, she had another agenda for me. After only six weeks in Kindergarten, this teacher decided that it would be a good idea to put Nicole into the Transition program the following year. The Transition program is a bridging class between Kindergarten and first grade. I was shocked! This teacher was considering "red shirting" my child for a year, after only six weeks in the classroom. How could she make such a prediction?

I began to ask her questions about the recommendation.

I wanted concrete evidence of why my child could not handle first grade, only after six weeks in Kindergarten. She replied by telling me, that Nicole was not listening at all times in the classroom. I asked her if that was the only reason she wanted to put Nicole into the Transition program, her reply was yes. She added, that it will not hurt her, for that way she would be at the top of her class. I asked what she meant by that statement. She said that academically, Nicole was at the top of her class, but since she did not always listen, a year in the program would take care of the listening problem, which she felt was developmental and Nicole also be older than the other children, which means she would be smarter. RIGHT! I told her I was very concerned, that she was making this decision too early. A decision that would affect my child's life forever.

I asked her if Nicole seemed to be interested during classroom instruction. She told me she felt Nicole was interested, but she just did not listen all the time. I suggested that she watch Nicole carefully in class, to see why she was not listening. Perhaps, Nicole was not being challenged. Again, she responded by telling me that Nicole was interested, but her listening was developmental and an extra year would take care of that. I suggested to her that we wait to decide to put Nicole into the Transition program,

especially, since we still had eleven months before Nicole entered the first grade.

Two days after the conference, Nicole's teacher called me and said that I was correct, that the program was probably not the appropriate choice for Nicole. The entire time I was dealing with this problem, I felt that the teacher was pushing the program, even if the reasons for subjecting my child to the program were not completely legitimate.

Interesting enough, an article at the end of the school year was printed in the Houston Chronicle and revealed that Nicole's school district was not using the Transition program appropriately. I find that fascinating! The schools had enrolled more children into the program, than any other district in Texas. They were not only choosing the children who truly needed an extra year of growth, but were also choosing children, like Nicole, that could make the school look good and holding these children back would make the children seem brilliant and push them to the top of their class. In reality, all they were doing were destroying the self-esteem of many children by holding them back when it was unnecessary. Another issue this could be related to is success rate and possibly to the statistics on drop-out rate of children, who have been held back in school before. It is my understanding, the chances of a child dropping out of

school increases every time he/she is held back a grade. I did not want this for my child, especially based on the insufficient data this teacher presented, as the basis for this decision.

After resolving that issue, I began to observe the class once again, for implementation of whole language strategies. I would comment on the material used in the classroom, in a very non-threatening way and on the class books the children were making, which included using invented spelling and creativity.

As the year progressed, I began noticing that Nicole was not as much of a risk taker, than she had started out to be. I noticed that while she was taking risks at home these behaviors were not being reinforced at school. This concerned me, because I felt she was not receiving adequate positive feedback from her teacher, to increase the likelihood of her success. I was volunteering at Nicole's school one day and I noticed some of the children from Nicole's class, reading one of the books they had made in class, to the assistant principal and she was praising them on how well they were reading. I went home that day and asked Nicole if she ever had the opportunity to read her book to the assistant principal and she told me no, because she could not read like everyone else in her class.

I was stunned! I asked her how she knew she was the only one in her class that could not read. She said she just knew.

I thought Kindergarten was supposed to be a time when the child's self-esteem is to be built up, not knocked down and I also thought a positive environment was encouraged at all times, as the teachers had stated previously in their talk at the beginning of the year. My frustration and anger grew as my child's risk taking abilities and self-esteem were being destroyed. I began to interject more and more positive reactions toward Nicole's, work to make up for what I believed she was missing at school. I am sad to say it was not enough, because she wanted so desperately to please her teacher, whom she adored. I decided to call the teacher and thus began my struggle to deal with Nicole's self-esteem problem. I told her that I predicted, that Nicole would respond positively to praise and I would appreciate her efforts to be more positive with Nicole and she agreed. She told me she would make an effort to make her feel successful. However, Nicole never built up her self-esteem to what it was when she entered kindergarten. I still to this day have to keep encouraging her and make her feel that she is successful in what she is doing.

I believe it is very important for parents to realize, that the way we were taught in school through phonetics first approaches, is not the most effective way to teach children now. Researchers have found more successful ways to teach our children to learn to read and write and we as parents need to understand how the whole language philosophy makes this happen. My understanding leads me to believe that reading and writing parallel the way children learn to talk and reading and writing instruction must match this.

Children need to be exposed to print and real books in the process of learning to read. Children learn to read by reading and learn to write by writing. Reading and writing also need to be taught together as one. It takes opportunities to engage in both for the child to be successful. One process supports the other. Children begin to learn about letters and sounds by reading real books with their teachers and by experiencing writing as a process. As ours is a print filled society, most children are aware of letters and sounds before they enter Kindergarten, so it seems ridiculous to focus on each letter and its sound, when the children can make meaning from the text, if they are given the opportunity to read and write during the day, using the strategies of whole language.

As parents, we can help in many ways to make the whole language program a success in our community. First of all, if parents are willing to donate one to two books throughout the year to their child's teacher, then by the end of the year, their classroom library would be a great component in the classroom. The school could provide a list of appropriate books to choose from and this would make for a successful library for each teacher. Secondly, communication between teachers, parents and principals is a must. Nicole's principal was never available during Nicole's first year of school, but with complaints from the parents that has changed this year. The principal is available for conferences more this year and communicates more often during meetings than last year. Parents need to have a full understanding of the programs the school is initiating. A one hour meeting is not long enough for parents to understand what the program involves and what progress is expected from the children. These meetings should be on-going periodically throughout the entire year.

If parents become confused or frustrated, this only complicates matters at the teacher/parent level. Parents need to be informed on how to understand the work their children are bringing home. Even if the parents do not fully understand natural language learning or do not know what

whole language is, they should be encouraged to ask questions, they have, concerning their children. The teachers need to make the parent feel comfortable asking questions and the teachers need to be able to answer those questions. Parent education is as important as teacher education.

Some parents believe, that if the child has not spelled all of the words correctly, then he/she must be doing something wrong, so the parent will either correct the paper or mislead the child by telling him/her that they need to be spelling all the words correctly. This reduces the child's drive to become a risk taker and drops his/her self-esteem, if the child does not feel successful. The schools need to understand that there are many parents, that are interested in their child's future, but are hesitant to be involved due to the fact, that they themselves will seem like failures, since they do not understand whole language philosophy and its purpose. Communication lines need to be opened between parents, teachers, principals and administrators to make any program a success. Collaboration between each of these groups makes for success, if schools will take the parents input seriously, just as parents need to have confidence in their teachers.

If our children are going to be successful in school, then parents and teachers must learn to work together.

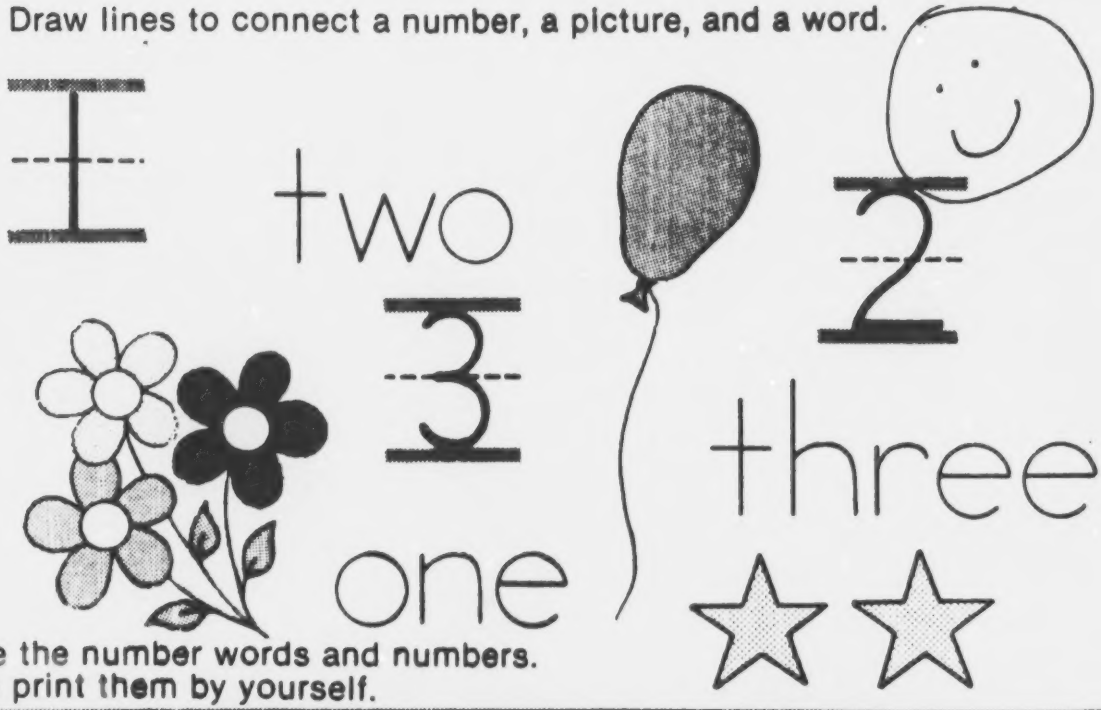
Although struggling through her Kindergarten year, Nicole has managed to progress beautifully in the first grade. She has begun to read on her own and has gained more confidence in herself. Her first report card from first grade was impressive (Example #3) and her teacher has encouraged more invented spelling and creativity in her classroom and has refrained from marking on the children's writing efforts. Examples #4 through #6 are samples of Nicole's writing during first grade. Although she is doing quite well due to my continuous effort to collaborate with her teacher; I can not help, but wonder how she would be progressing had she had a strong, successful first year in school. It saddens me to think of children, very much like Nicole, who do not have informed parents to push for "right things" for their child.

Although communication on the parent/teacher level and the parent/principal level has increased the awareness, to the importance of the children's reading capabilities, more parent education needs to be addressed, to make the program successful as a whole. This issue is a serious one, which must be dealt with, for the sake of my daughter and the millions of other children in our public school system.

Example 1

Name Nicole

Draw lines to connect a number, a picture, and a word.



Trace the number words and numbers.
Then print them by yourself.

one two three

One two thre

1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3

1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3

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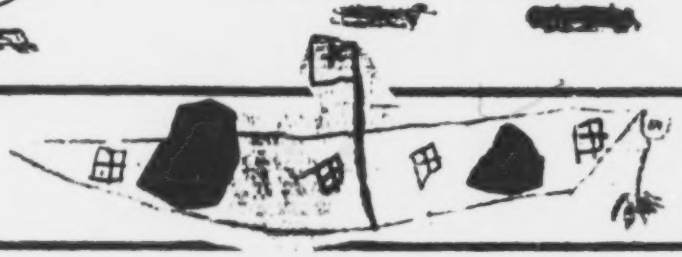
A Plane travels in the air.

A PAN CAN GO OVER LOO



A plane travels in the air.

A plane can go over clouds.

Example 2

Example 3

STUDENT NAME: DUMAS | NICOLE

STUDENT NUMBER: 0218000

GRADE: 01

SCHOOL YEAR: 90 91

SUBJECT		LVL	GRADES 1	2	3	4	5	6	L/R AVG	YEAR AVG	CONDUCT 1	2	3	4	5	6	WORK HABITS: LISTENS ATTNTV	FOLLOWS DIRECTNS	WORKS ORDLY	COMPLETES CLS WK	COMPLETES HM WK
LANG. ARTS	LANGUAGE	O		89						L/R	S	S					S	S	S	S	S
	READING	O		90							S	S					S	S	S	S	S
MATHEMATICS		O		97							S	S					S	S	S	S	S
SCIENCE (2-5)																					
SOC. ST. (2-5)																					
									COMPOSITE												
SCIENCE (1ST)		O		S							S	S					S	S	S	S	S
SOC. ST. (1ST)		O		S							S	S					S	S	S	S	S
HEALTH				S							S	S					S	S	S	S	S
P.E.				S							S	S					S	S	S	S	S
ART				S							S	S					S	S	S	S	S
MUSIC/T.A.				S							S	S					S	S	S	S	S

SPEC. PROGRAM SERVICES				
B/L	ESL	R/E	NIPS	G/T

TUTORIALS				
1	2	3	4	5

HOMEROOM CONDUCT					
1	2	3	4	5	6
S	S				

ATTENDANCE						
NBR DAYS	1	2	3	4	5	6
PRESENT	20	20	00	00	00	00
ABSENT	00	01	00	00	00	00

LEVELS
O = ON B = BELOW M = MODIFIED

END-OF-YEAR PLACEMENT			
PROMOTED	PLACED	RETAINED	NIPS

SUMMER SCHOOL RECOMMENDED	
YES	NO

GRADE DEFINITIONS	
A = 90 - 100	S = SATISFACTORY
B = 80 - 89	N = NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
C = 75 - 79	
D = 70 - 74	
F = 69 OR LESS	

1. STUDENTS RECEIVING A "D" OR AN "F" ARE ELIGIBLE FOR TUTORIALS, AND PARENTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO CONTACT THE SCHOOL FOR A CONFERENCE.
2. TO BE PROMOTED, A STUDENT MUST HAVE AN OVERALL YEARLY AVERAGE OF A 70 IN LANGUAGE ARTS, IN MATHEMATICS, AND A COMPOSITE WHEN LANGUAGE ARTS, MATHEMATICS, SCIENCE AND SOCIAL STUDIES ARE AVERAGED TOGETHER.
3. LEVELS NOTED BESIDE CORE SUBJECTS INDICATE WHETHER GRADES WERE EARNED USING ON-LEVEL MATERIAL (O), BELOW-LEVEL MATERIAL (B), OR ACCORDING TO IEP/MODIFICATIONS (M).

PLEASE DETACH AND RETURN SIGNATURE PORTION

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Soze has] ___ ceths.

; He fowrd 2 Mor ceths.

How mene ceths in all

nin

Super!

7 + 2 = 9 nicolt

DUAL

Example 4

Example 5

Nicole Oct. 1900

first I got MIBAD.

next I got re.peanutbudr.

last got to eat sum.

Good work! ☺

Example 6

* A LETER TO MOMY FROM NICOLE *

3-14-1991

I HOPE YOU ARE DOING GOOD UP THERE ON YOUR SPEACH ME AND
DADDY ARE DOING GOOD TO
I GOT TO RITE YOU THIS LETR ON THE CPOOTR
IT WAS SUNNY AND COD TO DDAY. DADDY SADE THAT IT ONLY GOT UP
TO 70 DGRES TO DAY.
I MISS YOU AND HOPE YOU CUM BAC SOON.

LOVE NICOLE.

Translation:

A letter to Mommy from Nicole

I hope you are doing good up there on your speech me and daddy are doing good too

I got to write you this letter on the computer

It was sunny and cold today. Daddy said it only got up to 7Ø degrees today.

I miss you and hope you come back soon.

Love Nicole.